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## Shooting with Helmut

Jay Kauffman

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## SHOOTING WITH HELMUT

The morning you fly from Paris to Monte Carlo to meet Helmut Newton you have a cold and feel like hell. As you pull up in front of the Hermitage Hotel, where Newton makes his home, the taxi driver asks if you would like a prostitute for the evening. His offer comes as a shock and seems out of character with your lavish surroundings, but then you realize that this is a place where people spare nothing to get what they want. "Non, merci," you say. Everything about Monte Carlo is dazzling and expensive-looking—the streets, homes, cars, gardens. Everything looks freshly washed and meticulously cared for. And, filtering down from above, the Mediterranean sun bathes it all in a pinkish, crystalline light, as if shot through a diamond.

You give your name at the front desk. "Monsieur Newton is expecting you," says the concierge. As you stand in the antique elevator, rising to the top floor, you think of his indelible images—long-legged, big-breasted women, powerful, erotic, unapproachable, often wearing nothing but high heels, vaguely sadistic. He is one of your heroes, someone who has devoted his entire life to expressing his fantasies without compromise.

Your all-too-cool agency in Paris had called with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. "Newton wants to see you!" Normally, Newton only booked women, never men. It was like being summoned by the king. Even Lindbergh, Weber and Ritts labored in his shadow. He was beyond needing clients, accolades or compensation. In the fashion world, it was not too much to say that a Newton project was like a revelation; it would alter the course of the industry.

You call Paris home, though you live out of a suitcase most of the time. Your suburban American past seems like a distant incarnation. Paris is where your mother agency is, where

your girlfriend is, and where you need to live in order to command a Parisian model rate. You are nearly thirty and have been modeling for five years—despite your family's reservations—and are on the verge of breaking into the big leagues. And you know that working with Newton would put you decisively there.

A young, muscular girl dressed in shorts, boots and a white tank top greets you at the door, her blond hair pulled taut into a pony tail. She leads you to a sitting room filled with books, antiques, large black-and-white details of women's bodies. "Do you have your book with you?" she asks with a German accent. You hand her your modeling book. She flips through it rapidly. "Take a seat," she says and disappears. You imagine her showing it to Helmut and then Helmut summoning you. And though you know it's ridiculous, you can't help but be thrilled at the prospect of meeting the man. You begin to cough, then sneeze, phlegm rattling in your chest—infuriated that on this day of all days you should be sick. From the sitting room, you see an older woman, dark-haired, with bangs, sunbathing on the porch and, beyond, a line of palms and the deep blue of the Mediterranean.

You hear what you assume is Helmut laughing. Is it your book he's laughing at? After a while the girl reappears. "Helmut is busy," she says, "but June will see you." Crestfallen, you figure you have just been blown off. You follow the girl out onto the porch, where the actress June Browne (a.k.a. Brunell)—Newton's wife and muse, and the subject of countless photo studies—reclines in a black bikini. Though in her sixties, she looks years younger. You introduce yourself, tell her you're American and, when not modeling, a poet. She raises her sunglasses, looks you over. She lights a cigarette and smiles. "Well, Jay..." she says, "we look forward to seeing you in L.A."

A month later, you arrive in Los Angeles. They put you up at Cha-



teau Marmont, where Helmut keeps a suite year-round, known for its ambience of excess and as the hotel where John Belushi overdosed. It's elegantly rundown, tucked away in a grove of palms, with a nice view of the city from your balcony. Models, stylists, hair and makeup artists fly in from all corners of the globe. No one knows the concept of the shoot, not even the client. All you know is that you are shooting a campaign for an Italian fashion designer. It's obvious that the shoot is only an opportunity, an excuse really, for Newton to live out his latest fantasy.

The first few days you only have fittings to go to and spend your time by the pool reading and spotting movie stars. You still haven't actually met Helmut, though you have been studying his images, trying to prepare yourself, imagining the hour when you stand face to face with his lens.

You see June one morning in the hotel lobby, wearing sunglasses, heels, an elegant black suit. You greet one another French-style, pecking each other on the cheek. "Why are you alone?" she says, concerned. "Such a handsome man shouldn't be alone—not in L.A... Gracious, do I need to fix you up with someone?"

"No, no, I'm fine," you say.

"Sweetie, you don't understand... You are in L.A. What cars are to Detroit, young, beautiful, single women are to L.A. Go have some fun."

That night you go out with two girls from the shoot, C. and E., both of whom happen to be deemed supermodels. Every once in a while, C. tosses her long blond hair, flashes a breathtaking smile, and E. sinuously dips a shoulder, cocks a hip, looks at you with her dark, bedroom eyes, and you see why they are so sought after, paid so much. Wherever you go, first a restaurant, later a disco, people appear stupefied, continuously staring and hovering at the periphery, as if struck by some neurological disorder. At first, you get a kick out of being seen with them, but very

soon the constant scrutiny grows unbearable. You realize even your greatest dreams of success are insignificant compared to the realm in which they reside. No one dares approach the girls or speak to them. Even talking is awkward as every word that passes between you is overheard by strangers. It becomes impossible to relax.

"My God," you say as you sit in the disco's VIP lounge, "how do you stand it?"

"Stand what?" says C., shouting over the pulsing music.

"All this attention!"

They laugh. "This is nothing compared to when I'm out with Steven," says E., referring to her rock star boyfriend.

"Yeah," says C., who won't even mention her boyfriend's name, "it can get really crazy."

So here you are, experiencing the overspill of fame—which, as they explain it, is nothing compared to their boyfriends' fame—and yet even this is far more than anything you can stand. You think of the countless people who long for fame as if it were the height of aspiration. But to experience even an hour of such notoriety would leave almost anyone reeling, desperate to have their anonymity restored.

E. grabs you by the hand and pulls you to your feet. "I feel like moving," she says, and it's clear she's accustomed to getting what she wants. You dance a few songs together. She moves languidly like a bored cat. You think of that music video in which she rolls on the beach in a bikini—sand powdering her olive skin like sugar—and the singer fondles her while she looks at her nails. You imagine her being impossible to satisfy.

Later, back at the hotel, you and E. sit alone at the bar for a nightcap. You have the insatiable desire to reach out and touch her, like that singer in the video, only you can't shake the thought that this is E., the face (and body) of L'Oréal, Victoria's Secret....

June walks in and sits down next to you. "So?" she says. "Happy now? Does Auntie June know best?" You have no idea what she's talking about. She nods toward E. in a knowing sort of way. And suddenly it dawns on you that it was June who arranged the evening, who convinced C. and E. to ask you out in the first place. She lights a cigarette. "So much beauty..." she says of E. "How in the world can you resist?"

E. rolls her eyes. "She's trying to fix us up... in case you were wondering."

"Ah," you say, though you had figured E. was out of bounds, out of your league—the inamorata of a rock star.

June gets to her feet. "Do not ignore what the gods hath wrought..." she says with a smile. "Goodnight, my dears."

The next morning, as you lie in bed next to E., she says that she feels so incredibly alone and isolated. She had clung to you half the night as if she might drown or fall from a great height.

"Sometimes," she says, "I feel like everyone is looking at me like I'm deformed or something."

She stuffs her hair in a cap, puts on baggy sweats, sneakers, sunglasses—"my schlepping clothes," she says—and still people recognize her. You note the frequent double takes as you stroll along Venice Beach. A pack of rollerbladers streaks past. It's morning and already the sun scorches your shoulders, the top of your head. An elderly black woman says you make an adorable couple. E. smiles and takes your hand, swinging it back and forth, like you're a couple of teenagers walking down the halls of junior high.

"So, where's Steven?" you ask, his name dropping like a stone between you.

"On tour," she says, looking away, "in Europe some-



where... Milan, I think."

You walk for a while, still holding hands. You seem to share the same guiltless, fluid sense of what a relationship can be in this business. You pass a vendor, enveloped in steam that smells of hot dogs.

"He's probably with someone as I speak," she says.

You notice the crowds milling by—so many transparent faces. It's a cruel vision, but this is how the industry has formed you: you automatically disregard anyone whose appearance is less than extraordinary.

You stop and buy her an ice cream cone, which she licks as if it were a magnificent art. You continue down the boardwalk, passing a fortune-teller in a turban, a guy on acoustic guitar playing bad Dylan. She tells you about the small Scandinavian village where she grew up, about her beloved *mormor* and ice skating and eating pickled herring on rye.

You pause to watch the weightlifters at Muscle Beach as they make their masochistic sounds, plates clanging together, bodies like overstuffed sofas—as though you're watching an alien species on display.

One of them recognizes E. You can see it by the way he keeps looking at her, sweeping back his bleached hair, adjusting his crotch. He turns to another bodybuilder, a black guy with dreadlocks, and points to her. In unison, they call out her name. You perceive others turning, recognizing her. The weightlifters draw closer, flexing their muscles, laughing, asking if E. would like to touch. You stand motionless together as the rank smell of their sweat surrounds you. You sense their steroid-laden bodies brimming with barely contained aggression. "What are you doing with this skinny pretty boy?" asks the one with bleached hair. It feels like half of Venice is watching. She turns to you with panic

in her eyes, then looks down at her sneakers. "Take me away from here, please."

At dawn, a location van drives you north of Malibu to a grassy bluff high above the Pacific, a glow building in the hills to the east. The air smells clean and salty and of seaweed. Already a half-dozen trucks have gathered in the twilight. An army of workers scurries about setting up tables, chairs, racks of clothes, movie lights. Generators hum continuously.

The Italian designer rises from his lounge chair to greet C. and E., giggling with uncontainable enthusiasm. You, he almost entirely ignores. He looks like a wax figure, with a jet-black toupee, impeccable tan, tautly renovated features. "Molto bella!" he says of the girls. "Bellissima!" His entourage eagerly agrees: "Sì, bellissima!" The art director, another gay Italian man, dressed in a rose-colored suit, explains the premise of the shoot, which, as he points out, can change at a moment's notice depending upon the whims of Signore Newton: "There is a wedding party," he says. "And you may or may not be the groom... Or maybe it is just a party...."

Now that you are finally on the verge of shooting with Helmut, you feel jittery and self-conscious. They dress you up in a tuxedo, blow dry your hair into a duck's wedge. The girls put on long, sequined gowns that look sprayed on, their hair mounted in elaborate buns. You are told not to sit down, for fear of wrinkling your clothes, though the girls collapse almost immediately.

A long, elegantly set table stands at the center of the meadow, draped in a pristine white tablecloth. A string quartet sits before their instruments in evening gowns and black-tie. Everyone is waiting, though no one has seen or heard from Helmut.



Even his photo-assistants have no idea where he is, explaining to the designer that Mister Newton is probably just waiting for the right light. "I do not wait," says the designer. As the day wears on, he grows more and more irate, lashing out at his entourage in vehement Italian.

The sun beats down from directly overhead. A general malaise settles over the crew. E., perhaps bored, leads you behind a catering truck and French kisses you till your knees go wobbly. By afternoon, one of Helmut's assistants receives a call and reports that Mister Newton is about to leave L.A.; he has just one more thing to take care of...

An hour goes by, then another. C. and E. persuade the caterers to break out the caviar and champagne (intended as photo-props). The string quartet, at the girls' request, launches into Mozart. Amazing what a pair of supermodels can get people to do. A breeze picks up off the Pacific. The sun tumbles over the bay in a blazing arc. After working himself up into such a state, the designer has fallen asleep beneath a beach umbrella.

You hear the helicopter before you see it. Then it appears to the south, moving towards you along the coast, sweeping in fast. The crew goes quiet and turns. Before long, it hovers just above you, maybe thirty feet off the ground. You assume it will begin to descend, but, instead, it simply hangs there as if by a cord.

Meanwhile, violent, swirling gusts from the propeller blades upend chairs, clothes' racks, a movie light, which appears to explode as it hits the ground. Sand and bits of grass fly up into your face. Dresses, suits, overcoats shake off their hangers, sail across the bluff and vanish over the cliff's edge, like a procession of martyrs hurling themselves without hesitation to their deaths.

Tablecloths rise and fill with air, tossing plates and glasses, scattering silverware like pick-up sticks. C. and E.'s perfectly coiffed hair instantly turns frizzy and lopsided. Their skirts billow up around them like Marilyn Monroe's in *The Seven Year Itch*, revealing their delicate under-things. Everyone is in a state of motion, chasing all manner of flying, cart-wheeling things. And looking utterly bewildered, the designer stands there watching his beach umbrella capsize and scud away.

Then you spot Helmut, leaning out of the helicopter with camera in hand, and immediately recognize the floppy hair and bulbous nose, the eternally boyish, handsome face. You see him firing away—something almost fanatical about his concentration—filling one roll after another, pausing only to grab a fresh camera.

A moment or two goes by like this and, when it is clear that the helicopter will not be landing, the designer succumbs to a paroxysm of rage, shouting and stomping his feet and stabbing his hands into the air.

Then it comes to you, with absolute certainty: the photos will be extraordinary, a tremendous success, worth every penny—a brilliant, deconstructive, self-mocking take on haute couture. You can even imagine the designer declaring himself a genius for giving Helmut free reign.

For an instant, Helmut seems to be looking directly at you from the cockpit, with a broad smile, as if this is all a price-less, private joke between you. Without fully realizing it, you find yourself smiling back. It will be the first and last time you see Helmut Newton.

A moment later, the helicopter turns and speeds down the

coast towards L.A., soon vanishing around a bend in the shoreline.

Years later, you read of Helmut's death in the *Herald Tribune*, how he sped from Chateau Marmont one night and smashed his car into the front gate, instantly killing himself (another footnote in the hotel's salacious history). And though you will never see June again, she sends a postcard one year from Monte Carlo, inquiring about your love life, closing with, Love, Auntie June. In the end, you will have your success—a few years of stardom. But, like everything in this business, nothing lasts.

You see E. one more time in the early 90's, during show season in Paris, on Place de la Concorde. She is just stepping out of a taxi with her new boyfriend, the famous French tennis star. She wears a short skirt and boots, her rich brown hair shorter, fashionably disheveled. She is decisively on, in full supermodel mode, strutting down the sidewalk, apparently at ease now in her celebrity role. From across the intersection, you call her name. She turns and looks, first one way then the other, unable to place the voice. And for a fleeting instant, you see the vulnerable girl who clung to you half the night. Then, taking the tennis star by the hand, she continues along Rue Royale, into the growing swell of admirers.